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THE TEACHING OF RUSSIAN--A RESPONSE TO NATHAN ROSEN.

BY- KEMPERS, JOHN

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ALTHOUGH NATHAN ROSEN'S ARTICLE IN A 1966 ISSUE OF "THE SLAVIC AND EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL" (ED 011 175) DID PINPOINT THE FACT THAT NO WORTHWHILE ACTIVE CONTROL OF THE VOCABULARY AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF RUSSIAN COULD BE ACHIEVED IN A TRADITIONAL 2-YEAR PROGRAM, HE DID NOT, WITH HIS PROPOSED USE OF READERS WITH FACING TRANSLATIONS, OVERCOME THE PROBLEM OF REAL CONCERN--WHETHER TO USE THE LANGUAGE OF EVERYDAY USAGE, LITERATURE, OR EXPOSITORY PROSE IN A TERMINAL 2-YEAR COLLEGE PROGRAM. THE LANGUAGE OF EXPOSITORY PROSE IS THE ONE IN WHICH THE NON-RUSSIAN MAJOR COULD, BY THE SECOND YEAR, REACH THE GREATEST DEGREE OF PROFICIENCY BECAUSE OF FEWER VOCABULARY PROBLEMS AND COULD, BY LIMITING READING MATERIALS TO HIS MAJOR FIELD OF INTEREST, ACQUIRE INFORMATION NOT AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH SOURCES. AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND YEAR OF THIS TYPE OF PROGRAM, THE USE OF KARPOVICH'S "LECTURES ON RUSSIAN HISTORY" WOULD BE OF GREATER BENEFIT THAN ANY OTHER TEXT OF COMPARABLE SIZE. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE SLAVIC AND EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL," VOLUME 11, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1967, PAGES 71-74. (AB)

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The Teaching of Russian: A Response to Nathan Rosen

John Kempers, Colby College

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Nathan Rosen's article, "All's Well That Ends Badly" (*SEEJ*, X [1966], 46-65), begins well. It draws attention to the vital question that faces teachers of Russian: "What sense of *achievement* can we offer to induce a college student to invest, in the course of studying Russian for two years, from one tenth to one eighth of his time (and tuition money) in the pursuit of this admittedly difficult subject?" Rosen's article has the further merit that it pinpoints the most difficult single aspect of the study of Russian: its vocabulary. Finally, the article states unequivocally the bitter truth: in two years of three to five meetings per week (with an intervening summer), we can give the student no worthwhile degree of active control of the language.

Rosen dismisses both the grammar-translation and the audio-lingual approaches as incapable of solving the student's basic problem of vocabulary control. He offers a solution of his own which is intended to overcome the faults and avoid the pitfalls of the other two methods of approach. The purpose of this article is not to enter fully into a discussion of the merits of one "method" over another, but simply to point out a few instances where, it seems to me, Rosen has perhaps not thought things through sufficiently.

The first and principal difficulty is the question of the newness of Rosen's "new" approach, whereby students spend the first two years translating from Russian into English—although readers with facing translations are being used. This is simply the method of the "grammar-translationists" in the traditional second-year course. Rosen does not want to employ discussion of the Heath readers in Russian in the second semester, because doing so "would require such oversimplification that students would learn little; my talk would simply be an exercise in spoken Russian for them" (p. 60). Rather than provide the students with an opportunity to begin to understand spoken Russian, Rosen would discuss the stories "on a sophisticated level" in English, in order to arouse in the students an interest in Russian literature and history which "may develop into a lifelong passion." Perhaps one should consider here the problems of freshman English courses, in which not a great many "lifelong passions" for literature are developed. In any case, the subject under discussion is presumably Russian *language* teaching, and only secondarily literature and culture.

Rosen objects to the typical Russian reader because its "sadistic" construction reminds the student constantly that his task is to learn a language rather than enjoy a story. If he uses a reader with facing translation, then at what point do his students "enjoy" the story, the first time they read it in English? At this point their "natural curiosity about what is going on in the story" is satisfied (p. 49). One wonders whether his students keep enjoying this same story as they "read and reread the text in advance so often that they will have a smooth, rapid delivery" in English—especially since they know that there is a smooth English "delivery" on the facing page all the while. Students must eventually get the idea that they are in class, not to enjoy a story, but to learn a language.

After mentioning the limitations of readers with end-vocabularies, Rosen asserts: "A reader with a visible vocabulary would liberate the student from these limitations, would turn language study into a challenge and a pleasure, and kindle interest in Russian literature" (p. 50). If this is so, then the greatest interest would be kindled where the student would be most completely liberated from limitations—that is, in his native language. But we don't see college students all becoming great lovers of English literature. Perhaps we should face the unpleasant fact that among our potentially best language students there may be some who are insensitive to literature.

Rosen states that students, by reading in Russian (translating?) "a substantial amount" of certain stories and then discussing the stories in English, can, at the end of the third or fourth semester, "read any text of average difficulty rapidly, accurately, and with pleasure" (p. 62). My own experience indicates that, after a second-year student has diligently worked on a story like *The Queen of Spades*, making a real effort to learn as many words as possible, and then turns to *The Overcoat*, he finds to his horror that all his hard work proves of little avail—he sees an almost new language where again thirty to fifty words per page are completely new to him. If he persists until he has "mastered" this story as well, and then, in eager anticipation, picks up *Asja*, the same frustrating experience is repeated all over again—and, in Rosen's words, "the legend of the 'difficult Russian language' has acquired another convert in the world" (p. 56).

Rosen maintains that his students, after speaking English in his classes for two years, and after hearing English for two years, have "an excellent pronunciation" (62–63). Does he mean an excellent *Russian* pronunciation?

Rosen criticizes Claire Walker for advocating the use of texts in "geography, history, and grammar" (the phrase is used repeatedly, p. 52), because, among other things, the language and style of these texts do not equip the student to read classical Russian literature, which seems to be Rosen's single aim (but not Mrs. Walker's). It is, then, curious that he uses Karpovich's *Lecture on Russian History* in between *The Overcoat* and a play by Čexov. Having learned to translate *The Overcoat* "smoothly and rapidly" will prove of no help to the student when he starts to tackle Karpovich, and having learned to translate Karpovich will be no help when he turns to a play by Čexov.

Rosen's focus is not consistent throughout his article. Several times, and especially in his point 2 on page 57, he seems to be talking about students who will take Russian in college for only two years, i.e., he is not talking about Russian majors. At the same time, his *podtekst* reveals clearly that he is really thinking about actual or at least potential Russian majors most of the time.

Finally, Rosen criticizes the critics of various aspects of the oral-aural approach for proposing remedies only within the confines of this same approach. Unfortunately, Rosen himself stays within the confines of the artificial division of the Russian language into the "four skills"—understanding, speaking, reading, writing. He asks, in essence, the same question that is asked by the people he criticizes: "How can we best teach the Russian language?" This is all the more disappointing since he twice came close to discovering something important: the existence of different Russian languages. On p. 54 he states: ". . . the vocabulary as well as the structure of spoken Russian differs markedly from the written language." And on p. 61: ". . . the vocabulary and syntax of fiction and non-fiction are quite different."

The question concerning how best to teach the Russian language is wrong, because it implies that somewhere there must be some magic method that will yield wonderful results. But if the focus is on students who will take Russian in college for two years, from three to five hours a week, with a summer in between, it should be clear that "method" is of little consequence before the all-decisive factor, time. It might be more profitable to ask the following question: "Which of the many Rus-

sian languages do we want to teach to our students who will take Russian in college for only two years?"

Perhaps it would be generally agreed upon that only three Russian languages merit being offered to these students: (1) the everyday language of the average educated Russian; (2) the language of literature; (3) the language of expository prose. If we think in terms of these languages, we can restate our question in the following ways: "Which of these languages will be of most benefit and interest to most Americans studying Russian in college for two years?" "In which of these languages can an American studying Russian in college for two years achieve the greatest degree of proficiency?" If we put our questions this way, we do indeed run into a number of most pleasing coincidences.

(1) The everyday language of the average educated Russian does not fill the bill. It is nearly unlimited in scope, and, in order to yield any benefit and interest, not to mention pleasure, it requires a high degree of active control—such a high degree as cannot be achieved by any method during two years in college.

Fortunately, the biology, or history, or government major who plans to go on to graduate school or government work is not particularly interested in this language—certainly not if he is told honestly at the beginning of the second year how limited a degree of proficiency he could hope to achieve by the end of the year.

(2) If the everyday language of the average educated Russian is out, then the beautiful language of nineteenth-century Russian literature, where everything, in Rosen's apt phrase, is "metaphor, ambiguity, connotation, complexity," is even less suited for our purposes. Metaphor, ambiguity, connotation, complexity—these are exactly the features that make the second-year student despair of ever mastering "the difficult Russian language." Further, the scope of the language of literature is even wider than that of the spoken language; indeed, as I hinted above, it would be nearer the truth to speak of the *languages* of literature and the limited degree of control of one of these languages that can be gained by "reading" part or all of one story by one author is of no great help when the student is faced with a work by another author. Again we have a happy coincidence: our science, or humanities, or social science major is not interested in translating *The Overcoat*—if nothing else, he is smart enough to realize that it has been done already, and much better than he could hope to do it himself.

(3) This leaves the language of expository prose. This is exactly the language that our non-Russian majors are really interested in: they want to read material that will give them information about their major field of study— and if from a Russian article or book they can get information that would not have been available to them in an English source, their sense of achievement will indeed be great.

By most happy coincidence this is precisely the language in which these students, in their second year of studying Russian, can most quickly reach the greatest degree of proficiency. It is in this language that the vocabulary problem, while still great, is considerably smaller than in either of the other two languages: here, the students run into the greatest number of cognates; here, words carry the least load of metaphor, ambiguity, and connotation; here, many clichés occur with great frequency.

Moving from the word to the sentence, it is in this language that the total meaning of a sentence comes much closer to equaling the sum of the meanings of the individual words that make up the sentence than it does in the other two languages. Idioms, ellipses, clever turns of phrase, unexpected twists, that delight the Russian reader or listener and drive the American second-year student to hopeless and helpless distraction, are at a minimum here.

While even here it would be nearer the truth to speak of the languages of expository prose in the plural, we can limit the field of study to one language in a natural way by having students read material in their major field of interest. This has the

further advantage that the knowledge of the subject matter will serve as a continuous self-check on the students' interpretation of what they are reading.

Finally, in this language there exists a textbook which, when used to start the second year, opens the doors in a way that no textbook of comparable or even much greater size can hope to do for the other two languages: Karpovich's *Lecture on Russian History*. Mastering Karpovich is not only much easier than mastering either *The Overcoat* or the two volumes of Dawson-Humesky's *Modern Russian*, it yields much greater benefit.

By "mastering" Karpovich I mean more than just going through it once in English. I divide the book into eleven reading (translation) assignments and have made out a set of exercises for each of these assignments. The students read (translate) for one day, then work on the corresponding exercises for the next day. These exercises give the students *temporary active control* of some of the material. The ultimate aim of this temporary active control is not so much permanent active control (although some of the better students offer a pleasant surprise in this respect), as much more profound passive control. Another advantage of the exercises is that, from the very beginning, half of the class meetings on Karpovich are conducted in Russian. After four or five of the reading-translation hours have been devoted to a careful check of the students' translation of the text into English, it is found that it is no longer necessary to do this in class: the students are quite able to translate by themselves, and all of the remaining time with Karpovich is spent in Russian.

After working through Karpovich in this manner (and learning something about Russian history in the process), the students are ready to translate (with the aid of a dictionary, to be sure) just about anything in their major field of concentration—whether it be such a closely allied field as history or such a seemingly far-removed field as chemistry. It is gratifying indeed, that the language that is of most interest to the non-Russian major is at the same time the one in which he can, in the second year, reach the highest degree of proficiency and the greatest sense of achievement.

The inevitable question will arise: Where does that leave our Russian major? Answering this question fully requires more space than is available here, but I would like to say the following: in my opinion, Russian majors should do more than read (translate?) an impressive number of stories by a great number of authors. They should read fewer stories but at the same time find out why these particular stories are considered important by both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russians; they should begin to understand how the Russians look at these stories; that is to say, they should read Russian literary criticism, from Belinskij to Tomaševskij. In the fourth semester, while the chemistry major is reading articles on chemistry, and the history major articles on history, the Russian major might, for example, after quickly reading *Fathers and Sons* in English, translate some of the many critical essays that have been written about this novel. Apart from seeing the novel in a much broader light, the student would again have the satisfaction of reading something that is not commonly available in English.

Thus the Russian major would enter his third year with the ability to read literary criticism (not yet without a dictionary, to be sure). And perhaps, if exercises were used continuously in his advanced courses to go along with his continued reading of literary criticism, he might even be able to understand a lecture on Russian literature in Russian when he gets to graduate school or to Moscow University.

Admittedly, in his third year he would have to begin learning a "new" language, the language of literature. But perhaps after reading quite a lot of expository prose the shock would not be too great; it would be smaller, at any rate, than when this language is started in the second year. And certainly now, with a major in his third year, the motivation would be strong.